

The midwinter Fling Ding dance began in the Sonora Wool House in 1939, a time of shortgrass dances in old courthouses and on concrete slabs on the rodeo grounds to isolated instances of shearing boards and front porches. The novel idea of the nine originators was not the location, but making a bottle of spirits the admission charge and a not-so-unusual condition for the times of requiring formal dress.

Wool house hands stacked the holdover inventories of wool and mohair to the ceiling to clear room for a dance floor and a bar. Big-name bands provided the music year after year. Newspaper scribes from Fort Worth west photographed ladies dressed in sparkling evening attire standing backed by the white starched shirts and dark suits of their gray-headed escorts. As the guest list grew into the hundreds, the socially ambitious coveted the morning-after reviews, hoping next year to receive an invitation to the Fling Ding.

All the verities of this life altered the guest list and hosts' choices. Divorces, death, disabilities, feuds and politics yielded to rejuvenation by second marriages, births, health care, peace treaties, and new coalitions. The bar became so popular that an additional combo or soloist expanded a scene already credited to be the biggest visiting affair in the shortgrass country.

Today, the type of band determines the generation division between the dance hall and the bar. Hokey pokey hard rock groups fill the floor with shimmying figures doing mini-skirted and baggy pant twists, sending the graybeards and the grannies to the coffee room or the bar. A big band like this year's music reversed the order. Old duffers too stiff to climb the wool house stairs without a banister swung to dance steps lost long ago in the 1940s, so fleet of toe, the white pearls on the ladies' necks swirled in the near darkness. In the bar, in a cacophony equal to starlings swarming a city park, youngsters of tender cheek laughed and talked so loud, the music became a muffled afterthought.

Short of having an emergency room facelift, I knew where I belonged. Curious about the bar, however, my friend and I walked back through the tent and burlap tunnel as far as the big doorway. A politician appraising a rally would have called the crowd "a thousand strong plus overflow." Stricken by the mob and forced into a retreat, I thought what a modest contribution my bottle of hooch was going to make in such a huge thirsty crowd served by 100 feet of bar space, standing in lines 20 paces long.

On the dance floor, the enthusiasm of my colleagues was catching. Name dropping was, "Oh Monte, I want you to meet my granddaughter," or "at intermission, you must see the picture of my great grandbaby." An old college flame passed by without the slightest acknowledgement. Scowled when I caught her attention, hoping for a dance in the new

millenium. Twice odd acquaintances from somewhere in the past inquired if I still wrote a column, or worse, was I still able to live at the ranch?

Couples kept streaming through to the bar. Had the party been anywhere except in a warehouse built to hold millions of pounds of wool and mohair, the structure would have listed toward the barroom. (Down at Menard at a house warming once, dancers became so vigorous they danced the house off the foundation.) Please understand that in such a socially intense climate as the admission-fueled watering spot, peopled by men taking a night off from the strain of business, the incoming and the outgoing traffic balances by impatient wives and girlfriends going up front ready to go home.

Had I picked a prospect to chill a long drive home and frost a post-Sunday awakening after the Fling Ding, I'd have chosen a fashionable lady on the sideline of the dance floor, adorned in a splash of black nets and sequin bows. She retrieved her fur coat, sat facing the exit from the bar, doing a countdown of spiked shoe heel against concrete. Each tap recording the time from his "one more and I'll be right out" to the dreadful moment she was going to be "right back," or "drive right off." (Explanation for such a fine sense for marital discord is withheld to protect the guilty.)

But fun it all was. Dancing on the cornmeal slick floor to a beat of a hundred memories of rooftop dances, hotel

ballrooms, and tea dances at the Country Club. "Satin Dolls" and "Stairways Leading to the Stars" revived old dancing pumps long ago relegated to boxes and bags. Going out the door at midnight, a host using a flashlight provided the last Fling Ding hospitality to light the rain-slick stairs. The drive back to Mertzon wasn't long at all, humming old songs from an age of champagne elegance.